

# Turning Aside

*David A. Baer*

*Second Sunday in Advent (A)  
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*Text: Matthew 3:1-12*

One of our family's favorite outdoor places is the Ramapo Reservation up in Mahwah. The kids enjoy the hike up to the reservoir, and if it's not too crowded we can sometimes bring our beagle Baxter along with us—though there's no way we can *ever* let him off leash, because he's very much conditioned by centuries of breeding to go noisily chasing animals through the woods. I like to point out the trail blazes on the trees to our kids—three for a trail head, two for a turn, and one simply to mark the path's continuing progress. But mostly we just stick with our usual hike. We know the way, and so long as coyotes aren't marauding through the park, it's safe and straightforward.

I do remember, though, one time in the days before kids and before I had a built-in GPS in my pocket, when I set off around the upper reservoir assuming that the trail would hug the water's edge, and I'd be on my way back down the mountain shortly. Instead, the ground at the upper part of the lake became swampy, and the trail kept veering away, until I realized that this was going to be a much longer hike than I had planned. The wise thing to do, when the trail doesn't go where you want it to go, is to turn back. But I didn't do that. I just kept following the path as it turned and led farther and farther away.

There's something in us, isn't there, that doesn't want to backtrack, to correct our course, to admit we've made a mistake, and that we need to go back. Sometimes we continue to cling to our choices long after we've realized they were wrong. Economists call it the "sunk cost fallacy," while others call it simply being stubborn and pig headed. But most of us do it anyway, because it takes work to turn around and go back, and it means admitting that a path you've pursued is useless or worse, that it was harmful. That's one reason scammers can continue to bilk their marks long after they know something's not right. It's why family members continue to feud through the years. It's difficult to turn back.

Our gospel lesson this morning is about John the Baptist, and we're told his campaign slogan right up front: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." This was a message full of hope for the people who came out to see John in the desert, because things were going badly for most of them. Many were poor. Some had lost their lands as the Roman occupiers rewarded their allies and friends. All of them wondered when God would act to restore the Jewish nation, and restore the blessings of the promised land. So they would have thrilled to the message that the kingdom of heaven—in other words, God's way of doing things, God's will for the world—was near. But to this message of hope, John adds a demand for preparation: "repent!"

The word in the original Greek text is *μετανοεῖτε*, which means, "Think again! Change your mind!" But that makes this a very heady sounding proclamation, doesn't it? It makes it sound as though John is asking people to renew their perspective, rather than their way of life. And if that's what he meant, if all John wanted was for people to

take on a new point of view, or even a new intention, it would be curious for him to take umbrage at the Pharisees and Sadducees, the religious establishment, with the words, “Bear fruit worthy of repentance!” John is not judging their worldview or their intentions. He is judging their deeds. And his assessment is that they are a “brood of vipers” that pose a danger to others, and that unless they change not just their minds, but their ways, they are like barren fruit trees that are cut down and burned.

No, John didn’t bring so many people out to the desert to give them a head trip. We don’t know for sure, but it’s likely John spoke Aramaic, rather than Greek, and the word he used in that tongue would have been *tuw*—or in the older Hebrew language of the Old Testament *shuv*—which means, “turn aside, come back.” This is not just a change of mind, but a change of direction. It means retracing your steps to the point where it all began, getting re-set in your identity as a member of God’s chosen covenant people.

And you can see this in the symbolic act John chooses to hammer his message home. The Jewish people remember the story of the exodus, and how their ancestors passed first through the waters of the Red Sea, and then through the Jordan River, as God led them into the promised land. John brings people back out to the Jordan River, and he has them pass through its waters, so that they can re-enter the promised land fresh and cleansed. To repent means to backtrack all the way to the exodus, to the story at the foundation of their identity as God’s people, so that they could be ready for what God was about to do. And John’s not quite sure what that looks like, but he does know that it’s his job to prepare the way for the one coming after him.

This story lands for us in a busy time of year, as we’re making our own preparations for Christmas. What do we do with John’s call to repentance? What does that look like for us?

First, it’s a recognition that in so many ways, our world and our lives are not prepared to receive him today. We remember Jesus, Mary, and Joseph as refugees who fled the danger of King Herod for safety in another country, and we recognize their story mirrored in so many modern refugees—from Syria, from El Salvador and Guatemala. We remember Jesus’ birth in a stable, because there was no room in the inn, and we see him reflected in so many who lack shelter living among us. We hear John’s indignant cries against the “brood of vipers,” the leaders who added to their people’s burdens, and we recognize our disappointment in our leaders and in ourselves. Have we added to the burdens of hurting people around us? Have we let down neighbors who needed us to be compassionate?

Advent is an opportunity to backtrack. It’s a chance to do what the people who came out to John at the Jordan were doing. What’s the foundation of our identity as God’s people? What’s the signpost, the trail head we need to return to? Where can we find the right path again? Remember your baptism. Remember the water that touched your skin, if you can—or if you were a baby like me, imagine that moment. That water sealed a promise, bound it right onto your soul. God said to you in that moment—and I hope there were parents and teachers and pastors and friends whispering it in your ear ever since—“You are my beloved child. In you I am well pleased.” If you’re feeling lost, guilty, anxious, go back there and begin again. God’s love for you is unconditional and unchanging. Like a parent racing out to wrap loving arms around a prodigal child, God eagerly welcomes us at those times when we need to start over, to retrace our steps, to repent. And it’s OK if you need to stay there for a while. If you’re having a hard time remembering who you are, if you find you’ve forgotten what it means to be the apple of God’s eye, then that’s why we’re all here. That’s the purpose of this and every Christian community—we’re here to remind one another how precious and beloved we are in the

eyes of a God who walked among us in Jesus and laid down his life for us.

One of you once spoke very powerfully about what it means to be part of this church. It touched me then, and I still think about it all the time. You said that you come here because you don't know who will be sitting next to you and needing a kind word or a prayer. Repentance doesn't have to mean wearing a hair shirt or going without food. Repentance means going back to the place where you can remember who you really are as a child of God. Is this a gift you need to receive today, or is it a gift you're being called to share?

And one important reason we need to believe that we're beloved children of God, one reason we need to repent, to retrace our steps, and let that deep truth about who we are seep into our bones, is that unless we believe God loves us unconditionally and always, it's impossible to see that this is equally true of the neighbors God has entrusted to our care—that God loves them and regards them as every bit as precious as God does us. That's why John judged the Pharisees and Sadducees' repentance as coming up short: "Bear fruit worthy of repentance," he said. If our love for our neighbors is lacking, then it's likely because we've forgotten that we are cared for by a God who fills our cup to overflowing. But God can work powerful wonders through people who know how deeply loved they are.

We heard the words of the prophet Isaiah today announcing the coming of someone who would bring justice to the poor and settle the hurts and hostilities of the world in a way that can only be likened to wolves and lambs living together in safety, to babies playing unafraid and unhurt around snake dens. It's an incredible image, almost impossible to imagine. But this is a season for wonders: a king—no, God!—lying tiny and vulnerable in a manger, a poor and homeless family giving a home to God's Son, God with us in a present and powerful way. To restore our capacity for wonder, to prepare ourselves for miracles, we need to repent—to turn back from whatever captivating path has enticed us, and to return to the beginning, to a God who loves us, who claims us, who walks beside us at Christmas, in every season of life, and for all time. Amen.